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Skepticism, Psychology, and Philosophical Criteria

Kristin Shrader

Throughout the ages, philosophers seem to have attempted to steer a course between the Scylla of dogmatism and the Charybdis of relativism or skepticism. Perhaps this course has been stormy because philosophical dogmatism and the making of ontological and evaluative commitments can be easily caricatured into closed-mindedness. On the other hand, the relativism sometimes implicit in the jargon of philosophical neutrality threatens to collapse *sophia* into sophistry.

My solution to the problem of philosophical neutrality rests on three theses, the substantiation of which is the purpose of this paper:

- (1) Both an *absolute philosophical neutrality* and an *absolute philosophical commitment* seem incapable of rational justification.
- (2) Since absolute commitment and neutrality seem unjustifiable, the only viable position open to the philosopher is *relative philosophical commitment* and *relative philosophical neutrality*. This position can be elucidated in terms of what Allport calls “open-ended” but “whole-hearted” commitment.
- (3) Four specific criteria, focusing on the concepts of consistency, completeness, presupposition, and implication, can be used to ascertain the merits of relative neutrality and commitment with respect to various ontological or evaluational issues.

Even though I hope to provide one possible analysis of the problem of philosophical neutrality, my remarks should not be taken to mean that the contest between “the philosopher as neutral” and “the philosopher as committed” is necessarily anything more than a verbal dispute. With Robert Ennis,¹ I believe that this issue is largely a verbal one, the solution of which varies with one’s definition of relevant terms. Hence to make my position clear, it seems incumbent on me to state how I will use the terms ‘absolute philosophical neutrality,’ ‘absolute philosophical commitment,’ ‘relative philosophical neutrality,’ and ‘relative philosophical commitment.’

Perhaps these terms can be understood best if one thinks of a continuum, at the right end of which is absolute philosophical commitment, at the left end of which is absolute philosophical neutrality. In between are relative philosophical commitment and relative philosophical neutrality.

‘Absolute philosophical commitment’ can be defined as “unconditional intellectual

assent to a particular philosophical position, such that the specified position is held as dogma, viz., held to be immune from all possible criticism or change" 'Absolute philosophical neutrality' can be defined as "complete absence of intellectual assent to any philosophical position, such that one is open equally to all positions." These two terms can be contrasted, respectively, as "complete closedness" and "complete openness." In between the stances described by these two terms are '*relative philosophical commitment*' and '*relative philosophical neutrality*,' both of which may be defined as "intellectual assent to the most plausible of all available philosophical positions, such that modifications in this assent are conditioned by future knowledge and experience." If one is closer to the "commitment end" of the continuum with respect to a particular issue, then the emphasis in the above definition is on "intellectual assent." If one is closer to the "neutrality end" of the continuum with respect to a particular issue, then the emphasis in the above definition is on the fact that such assent is conditioned by future knowledge and experience.

Why do I maintain that absolute philosophical commitment and absolute philosophical neutrality seem incapable of rational justification? First, there seem to be neither philosophical positions nor philosophical concepts which are wholly immune to criticism or change on the basis of further knowledge. Aristotle probably would have re-thought his notions of motion, matter, place, and time, for example, had he heard of general and special relativity. Aquinas probably would have modified his explanations of agent intellect, impressed and expressed species, for example, were he to witness computer simulation of cognition and electrochemical explanation of neuronal activity.

Not only do there seem to be no philosophical positions or concepts immune to change, but consider the consequences to philosophy were this *not* the case. If unconditional, unchanging intellectual assent were ever given to any thesis or concept, this would seem to entail that future factual considerations, such as "empirical fit" or "predictive power," were irrelevant. It would also seem that if a position were immune from criticism, then one would be doing ideology, and not philosophy.

Thirdly, it seems false to speak about absolute philosophic commitment except in cases where the starting points, or ultimate principles, of that commitment are totally presuppositionless. If in fact the recent contests in philosophy of science between covering-law theorists and logicians of discovery, between deductivists and realists, have taught us anything, it is that foundationalist epistemology is bankrupt. It is bankrupt not only because epistemic foundations seem to *change*, but also because in a real sense there are no foundations to change. Since Hanson, Feyerabend, and others seem to be correct in asserting that every fact is theory-laden, then there seems to be no fact/theory dichotomy and consequently no presuppositionless foundations or starting points. And if there are no presuppositionless starting points, then any philosophical position, whether of commitment or of neutrality, is only as absolute and as unchanging as are the presuppositions upon which it is based.

The fact that there are no presuppositionless starting points becomes more evident

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when one realizes that every time one makes a decision of commitment or neutrality *vis à vis* a particular philosophical thesis or system, that decision must be made in terms of criteria which are not wholly capable of justification. When one makes a decision of commitment, relative to the theories of Skinner, for example, one must presuppose either that behavioral criteria do, or do not, furnish an adequate conceptual basis for discussion of man. Also one must determine what are the criteria for asserting that behavioral criteria are or are not adequate. As soon as one talks of criteria for a particular judgment, one runs into the problem of the criteria for the criteria, and then the problem of the criteria for the criteria for the criteria. Unless one is to run into an infinite regress of criteria, it seems that one set of criteria must be invoked in spite of the fact that they are totally and unequivocally justifiable. Granted, some presuppositions with respect to criteria may be more plausible, more parsimonious, more empirical, than others. *Nevertheless, they are presuppositions.* And because any position embodies a certain number of theoretical presuppositions, it seems inevitable that change in these presuppositions necessitates change in the formulation of one's position. This is why conceptual revolution, in the Kuhnian sense, occurs and why it seems to negate any unchanging or unconditional positions either of neutrality or of commitment.

At this point, one might object that he could justifiably and unconditionally subscribe to some very general thesis, such as "all men deserve equal justice under law," or "metals expand when heated." There is a problem with this type of unchanging commitment, however. As soon as one moves away from mere *abstract generality*, toward a particular philosophical position, or toward a particular application of a general law, then presuppositions seem to be built into the very fabric of one's commitment. It is quite easy to talk about the necessity of equal justice under law, but often quite difficult to ascertain whether *in fact* a particular person, in a particular situation, was granted equal justice under law. Moreover it would seem impossible to assert that one's position (relative to the granting of equal justice under law in a particular situation) contained no presuppositions as to the nature, either of equality, or of justice.

Not all philosophers, of course, would assent to my first thesis, *viz.*, (1) both an absolute philosophical neutrality and an absolute philosophical commitment seem incapable of rational justification. One argument often used against this claim is based on alleged disastrous consequences which would follow from the impossibility of neutrality. It is maintained by Ennis, for example, that if it is impossible to be neutral, then it is also impossible to censure anyone for his partisanship, since the person censured could always reply: "But it was impossible for me to be neutral!"²

Ennis seems to forget that we do not simply censure a person for "being on the wrong side." Censure also seems appropriate when a commitment is not well thought-out. Hence even in a commitment model which does not admit of wholly absolute stances, it seems incumbent upon one to strive for the most logical and factual assessment of one's position. And for this striving or the lack of it, one is either praised or blamed.

Secondly, Ennis' argument from consequences wrongly assumes that all of man's actions can be interpreted in terms of one simple, black-and-white model. According to this commitment-model, every action clearly is either partisan or neutral, and censure for partisan actions only makes sense because one is capable of neutrality in some clear and discrete sense.

Although Ennis seems right in his implicit sanction of the Kantian maxim that responsibility entails freedom, he seems wrong in assuming that one can be held responsible for partisanship *only if* one is capable of being completely neutral. It seems to me that one also could be held responsible for partisanship if it could be shown that one were capable of being, at least, *less* partisan than in fact he was. Ennis seems to imply that responsibility for an action presupposes that one was capable of doing the *opposite* of what he did. Rather it seems to me that responsibility for an action presupposes that one was capable of doing something *other*, or *something better* than what he did. In other words, if one held that absolute neutrality is impossible, then he still could be censured for more egregious manifestations of partisanship. Even if the person censured responded: "But it was impossible for me to be neutral!" he could be countered with: "Yes, but it was possible for you to be *more neutral* than you were."

For example, even though Nixon has not been brought to trial, I would argue that it is impossible for me to be absolutely neutral in my evaluation of Nixon's part in the Watergate coverup. And although I might nevertheless be justified in expressing privately my reservations about his innocence, I would certainly be open to censure for using my classroom as a forum for one-sided, anti-Nixon propagandizing. In the latter instance, I would be criticized for partisanship, not because I was capable of being neutral, but rather because I was capable of being *less partisan* than I was. In other words, it makes as little sense for Ennis to say that the impossibility of absolute neutrality precludes censure for partisanship, as it would to say that the impossibility of man's attaining complete human perfection precludes any ethical censure.

Although Ennis' argument for the possibility of neutrality seems to fail for the reasons noted above, his remarks on the desirability and possibility of philosophers' taking an absolutistic stand do seem to point up an interesting psychological fact. This is, that as soon as one suggests that absolute philosophical commitment or absolute philosophical neutrality seems impossible, some philosopher (drawn to more black-and-white commitment models, as Ennis seems to be) will soon be exclaiming fearfully that this position has left one open to relativism or skepticism.

To counter the demons of relativism and skepticism, labels like 'absolute certitude,' 'absolute commitment,' and 'absolute neutrality' are created. The main difficulty with such labels is that they seem to betoken what Freud called "wish fulfillments," rather than actual realities. They seem to be postulated more because of alleged *need* for them than because of philosophers' *proof* of them. Even the need for such absolutes is not clear to me, however, since as I argued previously, we seem to be able to criticize gradations of evil, just as we censure gradations of partisanship. Hence

arguments against the possibility of justifying absolute commitment and absolute neutrality do not negate the possibility of commitment or neutrality, but only negate the wholly *unchanging* commitment or neutrality. My arguments deliver one, not from commitment or neutrality, but from a commitment-model which is both too discrete and too simplistic.

Perhaps what I have been trying to argue in philosophical language could be interpreted best by means of psychology. What I mean by relative philosophical commitment and relative philosophical neutrality seems to have been elucidated, in other terms, by Gordon Allport.

In his well-known book on the growth and development of personality, Allport presents a view of man as committed to a number of personal, evaluative, or philosophical positions.³ The hallmark of man's commitments, however, is that they are not totally presuppositionless. Such positions, he also notes, are never wholly unchangeable. Whether one is committed to Marxism, to behaviorism, or to a particular variant of theism, the maturity of one's commitment (says Allport) can in some sense be measured by its non-absolutistic character.

Maturity in any sentiment comes about only when a growing intelligence somehow is animated by the desire that this sentiment shall not suffer arrested development, but shall keep pace with the intake of relevant experience.⁴

Allport's injunction that mature commitment must "keep pace" with relevant experience seems much like my own earlier remark that unless positions of commitment and neutrality remain open to modification, one can be said to subscribe to ideological, rather than philosophical, tenets. "The healthy adult," says Allport, "develops under the influence of . . . schemata whose fulfillment he regards as desirable even though . . . unattainable."⁵ These nonabsolutistic schemata "exert a . . . dynamic effect upon daily conduct, and in so doing, direct the course of becoming."⁶ In other words, nonabsolutistic commitments are a guarantee against beliefs which can become "egocentric, magical and wish-fulfilling."⁷

Although one of the three characteristics of the mature personality is that it "always [subscribes to or] has some unifying philosophy,"⁸ mature personality is open to change in that it also has "the task of accommodating every atom of experience that is referred to it."⁹ More specifically, Allport characterizes mature commitment as *differentiated*, *dynamic*, and *heuristic*,¹⁰ and then gives criteria according to which these characteristics may be evaluated. The test of a differentiated commitment is the presence of critical tendencies.¹¹ The test of a dynamic commitment is the presence of openness to change or modification. The test of a heuristic commitment is that it "is held tentatively until . . . it helps us discover a more valid belief."¹²

Using the example of belief in theism to explain his notion of commitment, Allport

notes that non-dynamic commitments are "compulsive" and "fanatical." This compulsion and fanaticism arises from the fact that "there is a defensive ruling out of disturbing evidence."¹³

What Allport is saying is that we must be neither wholly neutral, i.e., open, nor wholly committed, i.e., closed. Rather we must be *both* committed and neutral. This means that our commitment model cannot be discrete, or black and white. It is perhaps best described as a continuum of probabilities. He writes: "It is characteristic of the mature mind that it can act whole-heartedly even without absolute certainty. It can be sure without being cocksure . . . Probabilities always guide our lives. Sometimes the degree of statistical probability can be ascertained: more often . . . it cannot."¹⁴

What separates the skeptic or the relativist, then, from the man who embraces both a relative philosophical commitment and a relative philosophical neutrality? Newman seems to have provided one answer to this question in his *Apologia*, where he says that certainty is impossible.¹⁵ Given the lack of justification for absolute certitude, the skeptic or relativist refuses to make any type of commitment, even a dynamic or heuristic one. On the other hand, the person who admits the impossibility of certitude, but who embraces a relative philosophical commitment and a relative philosophical neutrality, bases his position on a fusion of what Newman terms "probability, faith, and love."

The question remaining before us, however, is this: Given the philosophical *unjustifiability* and the psychological *undesirability* of either absolute commitment or absolute neutrality (as I have defined them), what are the *criteria* which render one philosophical position more probable or more worthy of faith than another? Such criteria are difficult to articulate because, in some sense, the criteria for one's criteria seem to presuppose a metaphysics. Hence the enterprise of discovering the probability of a particular philosophical position seems almost circular. At best, one's criteria must be as *little* open to question-begging as is possible.

Four such criteria which seem plausible to me focus on the concepts of (1) consistency, (2) completeness, (3) presupposition, and (4) implication. Accordingly I might term one philosophical position more probable than another, if it were more consistent, presented a more complete account of "the facts," involved fewer doubtful presuppositions, and led to no false or implausible consequences.

If I were evaluating the degree to which, for example, it seems plausible to commit oneself to Skinnerian behaviorism, my commitment would be more intense (that is, closer to the right end of the continuum I have described) according as Skinner's philosophy seemed to be more consistent, to present a more complete analysis of all relevant parameters of man's experience, to contain few implausible presuppositions, and to lead to few false or implausible logical implications. As it is, I might judge Skinner to be *inconsistent*, in both proposing to free man from societal control

and yet to condition him according to the norms of Walden II. Likewise I might judge his account to be an *incomplete* analysis of man's experience in that it seems to ignore rationality, and the exercise of intelligence, in favor of instinctual conditioning. His philosophy might also be said to contain the *presupposition* that man is not free, and the implication that man will be happier when he is controlled and non-spontaneous.

Admittedly, I have had neither the time to treat these four criteria of consistency, completeness, presupposition, and implication with the depth they deserve, nor have I showed their superiority over other criteria. It could be argued that even these criteria are in some ways inescapably subjective. Perhaps, however, I have suggested one fruitful way to describe the philosopher's commitment model: as differentiated, dynamic and heuristic. Perhaps too, I have suggested a model which offers a way to avoid both the morass of dogmatism and that of complete relativism.

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NOTES

- 1 Robert H. Ennis, "The 'Impossibility' of Neutrality," *Harvard Educational Review*, XXIX (Spring, 1959), 135.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 134-135.
- 3 Gordon Allport, *Becoming*, New Haven, Yale, 1955, pp. 75-77.
- 4 Gordon Allport, *The Individual and His Religion*, New York, Macmillan, 1950, p. 60.
- 5 *Becoming*, pp. 75-76.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- 7 *The Individual*, p. 60.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 65-83.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.
- 15 J. H. Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, New York, Dutton, 1912, p. 43.

